



ZORRO'S SHADOW

*HOW A MEXICAN LEGEND BECAME
AMERICA'S FIRST SUPERHERO*

STEPHEN J. C. ANDES

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For my favorite *zorritos*: Opal, Silas, and Mercer

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P R E F A C E

Who Is America's First Superhero?

AMERICA'S FIRST SUPERHERO WASN'T SUPERMAN. It was only in 1938 that he ripped open his first suit shirt and got confused for a bird and/or a plane.

And it wasn't Batman either. He's only been brooding in Gotham City's dark corners, surprising hapless criminals, foiling dastardly schemes, since 1939.

Wonder Woman? Nope. Feminist icon with Amazonian roots—only since 1941.

The Shadow? Uh-uh. His maniacal laugh and power to cloud the minds of men have only been around since 1930.

What if I told you Zorro was America's first superhero? The masked man in black first appeared in 1919. But unlike the superheroes above, he got his start not in comics—they hadn't really been invented yet—but in the pulps. Pulp magazines were fiction stories, hugely popular in America from the 1880s to the 1920s. Adventure tales. Crime detective stories. (The term *pulp fiction* came from the low-grade “pulpy” paper many of the magazines were printed on.)

Zorro's dual identity fit right into this genre. By day, he was the foppish aristocrat Don Diego Vega. By night, he was Zorro—Spanish for “fox”—a crime fighter and avenger who fought corrupt governors and army captains in Spanish California with his signature sword, bullwhip, and lightning-fast reflexes. He carved his calling card—a letter Z—on the foreheads of evildoers as punishment and as a reminder: Zorro was there, watching from the shadows, an avenging ghost who could appear wherever and whenever he willed. He did

it all with a general *joie de vivre* that would be lost on most superheroes today. Zorro was looking out for the weak and oppressed of Old Spanish California. And he was having a really good time doing it: “Ha ha!”—*parry, thrust*—“Ho ho!”—*feint, counter, jab*—“Take that, *mi amigo!* Justice for all!”

Sure, Zorro didn’t have supernatural or superhuman powers, but neither does Batman. And yes, Zorro wasn’t properly a comic book hero until later, after Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman had built the superhero genre in that medium. But Zorro laid the blueprint for the comic book—and movie blockbuster—superheroes we know today. He wore a mask. He had a signature costume. Zorro had an alter ego, a dual identity. He battled archvillains. A loyal sidekick? Yes, he even had one of those. Zorro, and all of his superhero accoutrements, came twenty years before Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman.

Zorro is America’s first superhero.

And there’s more.

What if I told you that Zorro—America’s first superhero—is proof that the whole superhero genre owes an enormous debt to Mexican American legends? Zorro is a product of Latinx history and experience. And, in turn, Zorro inspired the superhero genre. Logic tells us, then, that Latinx culture helped produce the American superhero. The American superhero is not just a product of Anglo, white American culture. The superhero is multicultural. The superhero is, in fact, a product of American diversity.

Imagine that.

I know what you’re thinking: *But Zorro is Spanish, right? Not Mexican.*

True. Zorro exists in the popular imagination as a whitewashed Spanish version of Mexican legends, but the character still remains connected to those Mexican legends. They’ve just been covered up. It’s time they were unmasked. It’s taken one hundred years for this history—this masked history—to be revealed.

*I’ve got the secret history of Zorro!*¹

Zorro helped create the American superhero, and the history of Latino American people helped create American culture.

It’s as plain, and as permanent, as Zorro’s Z.

PART I

GHOSTS

An era can be considered over when its basic illusions
have been exhausted.

—Arthur Miller

1

THE STATUE

Research Log #1

Reforma Boulevard, Mexico City

9:33 AM

IS ZORRO REALLY JUST FICTION? I couldn't get the question out of my mind as I walked the crowded streets of Mexico City.

The American writer Johnston McCulley wrote the first Zorro story one hundred years ago. He called it *The Curse of Capistrano*. The pulp magazine *All-Story Weekly* serialized it in five installments: August 9, August 16, August 23, August 30, and September 6, 1919. That's the origin of Don Diego Vega and his fictional alter ego, Zorro. Zorro was born in the mind of a white guy from Chillicothe, Illinois. End of story.

Or not . . .

I've been on a journey to find the origins of Zorro for the past two years. I've read McCulley's earliest stories; devoured the Zorro comic books of Everett Raymond Kinstler, Don McGregor, and Matt Wagner; and seen all the Zorro feature films, from Douglas Fairbanks to the Republic Pictures matinee serials to the spoof *Zorro: The Gay Blade* (1981)—and, of course, the Antonio Banderas and Catherine Zeta-Jones reboots (1998's *The Mask of Zorro* and 2005's *The Legend of Zorro*). I began my journey with Zorro already established as a cultural icon.¹ I've been a little obsessed, I suppose.

And of course, I've done my research. Scholarly books and articles piled up on my desk. I was, at first, skeptical of Zorro's status as a superhero. *What*

superpowers does Zorro have? As I explored the literature on superheroes, I discovered two important facets to the question: first, not all “superheroes” have superhuman abilities, and second, Zorro is more of a prototype superhero, one whose abilities were enlarged in the heroes he inspired—for example, the Shadow, the Phantom, the Green Hornet, and Batman.²

My investigation into the origins of Zorro also led me to ask myself, *Is Zorro really just fiction?* Because if Zorro was a prototype for later superheroes, could Zorro himself have had a prototype? My research began to suggest that he was based on a historical figure.

At first, I was dubious that Zorro was anything more than a romantic fiction, but as it turns out, I’m not the only one to look for the inspiration for the man behind the mask. As I studied further, two real-life inspirations for Zorro emerged.

The first inspiration I encountered was Joaquín Murrieta (ca. 1824–1853), a notorious *bandido* who terrorized southern California in the days of the gold rush.³ Tales of Murrieta have been much sensationalized, but many associate him with the masked crusader.⁴ In the Zorro movies with Antonio Banderas, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Anthony Hopkins, Hopkins even portrays an aging Zorro who bequeaths the mask to *Alejandro* Murrieta, played by Banderas. I began to think that all I had to do was prove that Murrieta was the basis for Zorro to make the Latinx origins of the superhero genre clear.⁵

Until I encountered inspiration number two: William Lamport, an Irishman of undeniably European origin. I discovered that the second real-life character who allegedly inspired the Zorro stories was the so-called Irish Zorro—an Irish Spanish adventurer who lived in the seventeenth century (1611–1659). He emigrated to Mexico and was captured by the Mexican Inquisition for a conspiracy to rebel against the Spanish Crown. He proclaimed Mexican independence more than 150 years before independence happened in 1810. He was burned at the stake.

His legend lived on, however, and in 1872 a Mexican author of romantic fiction named Vicente Riva Palacio wrote a novel based on his life called *Memorias de un impostor: D. Guillén de Lampart, rey de México* (“Memoirs of an Imposter: D. Guillén de Lampart, King of Mexico”). The theory, recently popularized by an Italian historian named Fabio Troncarelli, is that Johnston McCulley based his Zorro on Palacio’s novel.⁶ An interesting literary and cultural similarity was apparent between Lamport and Zorro.⁷ Marketing

for Troncarelli's book made a splash, especially in Europe. Headlines carried zingers like PADDY O'ZORRO, the WEXFORD WOMANIZER, and various other alliterative titles, ad nauseam.

But could it be true? Was Zorro based on a seventeenth-century Irishman?

This brought me to Mexico City, where I hoped to find out if there was anything to the idea. I decided to start my investigation with Lamport, because if Lamport turned out to be the real inspiration for Zorro, my whole claim that America's first superhero is based on Latinx history and experience would be on far shakier ground. I'm a historian, so I had to do my due diligence, to deal with the European Zorro—establish his merits, see how the evidence stacked up—before I could compare him with Murrieta. For the moment, then, I left aside Joaquín Murrieta's claims to the mask.

Before I found Lamport's statue, I considered the fictional Zorro as I'd come to understand him. I realized if I was to judge whether Zorro was based on Murrieta or Lamport I'd have to get a clear idea of who the fictional Zorro is.

Here's the rundown.

McCulley's Zorro came to the attention of Hollywood not long after the first stories appeared in 1919. Douglas Fairbanks Sr., star of the silent film era, snapped up the Zorro story and made the first film adaptation in 1920. He called the film *The Mark of Zorro*. Fairbanks gave Zorro more than a dose of athleticism—he jumped, he strutted, he did his own stunts. Fairbanks also gave Diego Vega his dandy characteristics. For instance, in the film, Fairbanks uses a handkerchief scented with perfume to protect his aristocratic nose from the unpleasant smells of plebeians; McCulley wrote that tidbit into later Zorro stories.⁸ So influential, in fact, was the movie on the early development of the character that editors renamed *The Curse of Capistrano* as *The Mark of Zorro* in later printings.⁹ McCulley continued to write new Zorro stories for the pulps. He would publish four serialized Zorro novels plus another fifty-eight short stories before his death in 1958.¹⁰

McCulley set his stories in California under Spanish rule, but he wasn't clear or consistent about the timeline. It could be the early 1800s or the 1820s, but they were all centered on Los Angeles, or Nuestra Señora la Reina

de los Angeles, as it was known then. “The Zorro franchise,” writes Eric Trautman, “exists in a historical vortex; from the beginning, it was more of a fantasy version of Mexico than a historically accurate one.”¹¹ Our hero was the son of a wealthy hacienda owner. He masqueraded at night with mask and cape to fight government and military corruption. His enemies were always upstart, unscrupulous *comandantes* who mistreated Indians and women. By day, Zorro was the foppish Diego Vega, who read the poets and couldn’t be bothered to ride a few miles to court his love interest. He wouldn’t be caught dead, so he said, playing a guitar under the window of a pretty *senorita*.¹²

All McCulley’s Zorro stories contained similar elements and themes. Heroism, love, honor, justice, truth—these were the staples of McCulley’s Zorro, mixed with action, adventure, and derring-do. Zorro had to take up his sword because those responsible for justice were not handing it out. Thus, the *caballero*, the gentleman—a man of blue blood, pure and noble—became the avenger of the weak.

In retrospect, it’s all pretty paternalistic: white rich guy has to be the hero. But then again, that’s also Batman in a nutshell.

This is the Zorro we know. Created one hundred years ago, he’s been the product of fiction—pulp, movies, serials, TV, comics, cartoons, satires, pornos, reboots, new stories, and crossovers. The legend of Zorro is a product of twentieth-century media. And Zorro always seems to reappear. His story is durable. Like other pop cultural icons, Zorro’s symbolism is not fixed but open to change as contemporary consumers look for what they need in him. Bandits, from Robin Hood to Mexico’s narco-saint Jesús Malverde, have always performed a function for their audiences.¹³ They are symbols of hope, symbols of justice, symbols of vicarious adventure.

It’s important, after a century, to delve into Zorro’s origins. If we’re going to create an icon that represents our hopes and symbols of justice, that sparks our imagination, we need to deal with the ghosts of Zorro’s past, put them to rest, and move on toward a more inclusive future. Telling better stories starts with telling the old, uncomfortable stories from the past.

I snapped out of my academic reverie and focused on the object before me: the statue of William Lamport. I stood in front of an enormous monument to Mexican independence looking for the Irishman. The monument looked a bit like the July Column in Paris, or Nelson’s Column in London’s Trafalgar Square. The Mexican victory column is called *El Ángel de la Independencia* (“The Angel of Independence”). It’s 311 feet high, with a golden angel on top. It stands in the center of the city’s main boulevard, Reforma, which is lined with shops, banks, and tourists, and at the time, with *Día de los Muertos* a few days away, the orange marigolds of the dead—the *cempasúchitl*—were in full bloom.

I scurried across the road toward the monument, which works as a convenient roundabout in the center of the boulevard. Stairs climb toward the base of the stone tower. Everywhere, groups were taking pictures. I circled the monument once—names of Mexican independence heroes and cultural icons adorn the stone; robed and seated women representing Law, Justice, War, and Peace guard each corner of the column’s base. One statuary installation is of a child leading a lion, as if to say that the birth of the Mexican nation came with untamed power. Miguel Hidalgo, the priest who set off insurrection in 1810, Vicente Guerrero, and others stand on the pedestal before the column rises to a staggering height.¹⁴

Where is the Irish Zorro?

I saw a door that led into the monument. There’s a mausoleum inside where, until recently, the actual remains of many of the independence heroes were interred.

The door was locked.

I peered through a darkened window and saw it—or him, I should say: William Lamport in marble, perfectly straight, staring up at the horizon. A partially opened interior door blocked half of the statue. I saw someone’s foot and part of a leg jutting out of the door. I knocked.

I knocked quite a bit. From the shadows I saw a police officer—or security guard, it was hard to know which. He motioned at me that they were closed. I knocked again, adding a contrite facial expression. He kindly opened the heavy brass door.

The police officer emerged with a full bulletproof vest and a smile. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and stood about five foot two. He said in Spanish

that I couldn't come inside and that the mausoleum was closed for the next year for renovations.

A year?

I explained my story. I was researching William Lamport. *Is that his statue?* I asked. I whipped up my courage and asked if I could take a picture. He kindly let me do so.

We talked, the police officer and I, about William Lamport, known as Don Guillén de Lampart in Mexico. He told me about several books on Guillén.

"This is sort of funny," I said, "but have you ever heard that Guillén de Lampart was the inspiration for Zorro?"

"Yes," he looked at me with a broad smile. "There are some who say yes, and some no. There's quite a controversy about it."

The police officer gave me a five-minute dissertation on the different theories. "Perhaps," he said, "as the legend of Guillén de Lampart went farther north it changed, and over time became the legend of Zorro."

Is it me, I thought to myself, or is this police officer really well informed?

I thanked him profusely for his time. A crowd had gathered around us. My thoughts spun in many directions.

What am I missing? I wondered. What in William Lamport's history ties him to the legend of Zorro?

2

THE PYRE

IN 1659, WILLIAM LAMPORT stood not far from where I was that day, but he could never have imagined that there would one day be a statue in his honor. At the time, honor was far off from Lamport indeed. He wore a conical pasteboard dunce cap painted with demons suffering the torments of hell. His cloak had a black cross of Saint Andrew, and it, too, carried demonic images—fitting clothing for one condemned by the Inquisition.¹

In his lifetime, Lamport was a scholar, a sailor, a soldier, a seducer, and a spy. Like Zorro, Lamport escaped secret dungeons, but in contrast to our masked hero, the Irishman advocated radical social revolution. Zorro always fought for the oppressed of Spanish California, but he was no insurgent. “Zorro is not one to urge rebellion,” a pirate named Bardoso says of the masked man in one story.² Lamport, however, freely promoted rebellion, sedition, and the abolition of slavery; the Irishman proclaimed himself king of Mexico, but was then recaptured and sent again to more dungeons. He spent almost twenty years in isolated torment.

He went a little mad.

In prison, Lamport claimed to see visions of angels, and he wrote almost one thousand psalms to God. He was called an impostor, a liar, and a heretic, and the Inquisitors made sure to condemn all his aliases. “Don Guillén Lombardo de Guzmán,” reads one document, “properly Guillermo Lamport; or Lampart.”³

And there were other identities besides his name—ones given him by the Inquisitors: “Don Guillén Lombardo de Guzmán . . . is condemned . . . for

having been, and being, a heretic, apostate, henchman of the sects of the heresies of Calvin, Pelagius, Hus, Wycliff, Luther, of the Illuminists [*Alumbrados*] and of other heretics and also theorist and inventor of new heresies, arrogant and pertinacious.”⁴

The Inquisition called him “seditious, reckless and scandalous.” He questioned the divine right of kings and the authority of the pope over temporal affairs.⁵ He insisted “on the right of the oppressed to overthrow tyrants by force.”⁶ He was “suspect in the faith.” They claimed Lamport’s psalms to God, which he penned while in prison using ink made from candle smoke and honey, were sacrilegious.⁷ Lamport, in short, according to the Inquisition, was an “unrepentant heretic.” The Inquisitors railed at Lamport for never bowing before the Virgin Mary and the crucifix in his dungeon cell. These were but small symptoms, they argued, of the man’s larger spiritual sickness.

“I have venerated them!” Lamport shouted back at the time of his sentencing, “Not that you have even noticed! But I do not respond to the accusations of demons. You are demons. All of you: the visitor, the notary, this seditious lawyer and these individuals who circulate through the tribunal calling themselves inquisitors, secretaries, and scribes.”⁸

This outburst was just further proof to the Inquisitors that William Lamport deserved to die. And so, on November 19, 1659, several guards fastened Lamport by an iron collar to an eight-foot stake. Some forty thousand people watched—priests, princes, and paupers alike. The woodpile under him was covered with pitch, but he paid no attention. He looked up; his gaze was fixed on a dark sky, which threatened rain. He searched the horizon as though expecting help to come, some unseen ally to free him.⁹

The fictional stories of Zorro are full of last-minute escapes, but history would not be so kind as to afford a *deus ex machina* for Lamport. The Irishman’s salvation did not come.

3

THE LEGEND OF DON GUILLÉN DE LAMPART

WHO REMEMBERED WILLIAM LAMPART? He was dead, ashes; the Inquisition even buried the Irishman's remains in a secret location so that no one would remember him.

But someone did remember Lampart, and the legend of Don Guillén de Lampart developed. Although his story became bound up in the saga of Mexican independence, there's no compelling evidence that Johnston McCulley used Lampart as inspiration for Zorro. He had plenty of other models to draw from in crafting his masked crusader—especially nineteenth-century adventure novels.

I went to the Mexican Archivo General de la Nación and found the actual Inquisition files on William Lampart. It's a large fortress of stone, that archive, a former prison called Lecumberri Palace, which now houses paper captives instead of living inmates. In several huge tomes I saw the script go from that of a learned scribe to tiny handwriting. It was Lampart's own confession—his testimony to the Inquisition where he laid out his life story.

Lampart's history is intriguing, to say the least. There are tales of how he was kidnapped by pirates. He was sent to colonial Mexico as a spy for the Spanish Crown. He had to live a double life for a time. In Lampart's life, there are some similarities with Zorro, but nothing truly striking. It seems as likely that McCulley used D'Artagnan from *The Three Musketeers* or Edmond Dantès from *The Count of Monte Cristo* as a model for Zorro as that he used Lampart.

Leaving the Archivo General, I made my way back to the Angel of Independence monument to take stock.

I realized there's a gap, or a pair of them, in the story. The William Lamport burned in 1659 *somehow* became the legend in marble before me. And, what's more, the marbled statue version of William Lamport *somehow* became the inspiration for the Zorro stories. The theory of the Irish Zorro only works if one can fill in these gaps: William to statue—statue to Zorro. It all depends on that vague, yet crucial, *somehow*.

For the first gap, I knew there's an image of Lamport that fits between the Inquisition's pyre of 1659 and the construction of the Lamport statue. And it's less of a *somehow* and more of a *someone*: the Mexican author Vicente Riva Palacio. If William Lamport is indeed Zorro's inspiration, then Vicente Riva Palacio is the missing link.

One hundred and sixty-two years after Lamport's death, Mexico finally gained its independence from Spain. Mexican independence came in 1821 under three guarantees: religion, independence, and unity. The new government abolished slavery and the caste system. The new nation inherited a society plagued by racism, put in place by Spanish colonialism. Legally, the caste system disappeared. In practice, white creoles—Spaniards born in Mexico—simply replaced *peninsulares* at the top of the hierarchy, while mixed-race Mexicans, Natives, and those of African descent remained in subservient positions. The military, a bastion of meritocracy, offered a place where mixed-race Mexicans could rise to political power.¹

Vicente Guerrero, a man of Afro-mestizo heritage, was just such an individual. A hero of independence, he and his fellow liberals—men who desired free trade, greater political participation, and a break from the colonial past—struggled to forge a new nation. Conservatives, men who wanted to protect colonial landholding, colonial privileges, and the power of the colonial church, aimed to forge the new nation in their own way. The liberals and conservatives fought each other for Mexico's future. Vicente Guerrero became president in 1829, but conservatives ousted him in a coup and executed him in 1831.² Just a year later, Guerrero's grandson, Vicente Riva Palacio y Guerrero, was born. He inherited his grandfather's political vision—the reform of Mexico's political institutions, progress through scientific knowledge, and disdain for the tyranny of colonialism.

It was in school, as a young man, when Riva Palacio first heard of Don Guillén Lombardo. He later wrote:

I was a child, and I was studying Philosophy in the Colegio de San Gregorio, when one of my classmates, more or less my age, told me, that many years before the priest Hidalgo had proclaimed the Independence of Mexico, a man, of the Irish nation, had tried to rise up as a king of Anáhuac [a mythical name for Mexico], liberating Mexico from Spanish domination; but the conspiracy had been discovered, and the Irishman had been put to death by the hands of justice.³

The young Riva Palacio believed the simple story. “The narration impressed me so much,” he wrote, “that throughout my life, wherever I heard speak the history of Mexico, or when I meditated upon it, the memory of the Irishman came instantly to my memory.”⁴

As Riva Palacio grew, the intermittent civil war between conservatives and liberals continued. Riva Palacio, like his grandfather, entered public life via the military in a context of bloody conflict. He fought for the liberals and their leader Benito Juárez, the future president of Mexico. The liberals separated church and state and wrote a new constitution. Conservatives, for their part, were down but not out. They looked to Europe for help. Conservatives, with support from the Catholic Church, conspired with the French under Napoleon III to set a Hapsburg monarch on the throne of Mexico. Maximilian I, an Austrian noble, ruled Mexico between 1864 and 1867. Riva Palacio, now a general, was given command of the army in central Mexico. He helped defeat the French invaders and rode victorious at the front of his division into Mexico City. The liberals arrested Maximilian and had him shot. Benito Juárez became president of the so-called Restored Republic. Riva Palacio entered politics and briefly served as a justice on Mexico’s supreme court.

But Riva Palacio’s next battle was mainly taken up with his pen. He established several opposition newspapers, *La Orquesta* and *El Ahuizote*, lambasting the political cronyism and political incumbency that followed Mexico’s government after Benito Juárez died in 1872. Riva Palacio went to jail for a short time when he criticized the administration of Manuel González, an interim president who served at the whim of Mexico’s real strongman, Porfirio Díaz. Riva Palacio was eventually released and subsequently took up a post as ambassador to Spain. President Díaz, apparently, decided that Riva Palacio was better off sent to foreign shores rather than be left close enough to continue his campaign of dissent. Riva Palacio died in Spain in 1896.⁵

As a novelist, Riva Palacio looked to Mexico's past in order to find a way forward to Mexico's future. From the late 1860s, his writing took a historical turn. He composed a series of historical novels based on sources he'd obtained from the Mexican Catholic Church. Many of these sources came to Riva Palacio through government channels. Beginning in the 1850s, Benito Juárez oversaw a project of secularization whereby the church had to give up property and influence, as well as the materials found in their archives. Riva Palacio obtained some seventy volumes of records created by the Mexican Inquisition. In them he found material for his most celebrated novels: *Monja y casada, vírgen y mártir* (1868); *Martín Garatuza* (1868); and *Las dos emparedadas* (1869).⁶ Riva Palacio wrote:

You may ask, dear reader, why I speak in the majority of my novels of the Inquisition? I would respond, that in the entirety of the epoch of Spanish domination in Mexico, the novelist or the historian cannot take the slightest step, without encountering the Holy Tribunal, that it encompassed everything and invaded everything; and if it causes displeasure to find it in a novel, would it not have caused the same in those who lived in those times, encountering the Holy Office at each and every step of their life, from the cradle to the grave, from the memory of their antecedents to the future of their most remote generation?⁷

To avoid a dark future in Mexico, according to Riva Palacio, one ruled by obscurantism and superstition, meant exposing the Inquisition as Mexico's *bête noire*, an obstacle to progress and freedom, in Mexico's colonial past.

The subjects of Riva Palacio's novels were lifted from actual court proceedings and processes found in the Inquisition files. He wrote about real people, but set them in fictional plots. As with the historical novels of nineteenth-century Europe, Riva Palacio used fiction to tell the truth about Mexico's colonial tragedies. He sought, like Jules Verne, Cyrano de Bergerac, Walter Scott, and Alexandre Dumas to "popularize scientific knowledge, avoiding the pitfalls of the fastidious."⁸ He could reach more people if his stories entertained as well as informed. People read fiction, and, like many nineteenth-century writers, Riva Palacio believed that history was prone to just as many half truths as novels. Novels could reach into the soul, expose the interior world of the

emotions, which were just as real as, and in many ways more real than, a strict recitation of facts.

Novels in the romantic tradition evoked the truth of feeling, and feeling could move people to action where dry, dusty tomes could not. He wanted readers to be captured by the way his protagonists had constantly faced resistance to knowledge. They were persecuted for it. He told, for instance, the story of Martín Garatuza, a trickster and charlatan who disguised himself as a priest in order to gain prestige, money, and power. Garatuza was a real individual, who faced trial by the Inquisition in the seventeenth century. But under Riva Palacio's pen he became a picaresque character who managed to outwit the Inquisition through pluck and derring-do.⁹ Martín Garatuza, writes Riva Palacio in the novel of the same name, "displayed all the sagacity of the she-fox."¹⁰ (*El zorro* is the Spanish word for "fox," and Riva Palacio referred to Martín Garatuza by the name—although in the feminine form, *zorra*.) Garatuza also took on the alter ego of a priest. Perhaps there is something of Garatuza in Johnston McCulley's Zorro?

If the name and the alter ego were present in Riva Palacio's novel *Martín Garatuza*, the other elements of Zorro were missing. But then it happened: Riva Palacio finally found his Irishman, whom he had been looking for since his youth. And when he found the Irishman, he found a character that seems very Zorro-like to the modern reader. "I was looking for I don't know what," Riva Palacio recalled, but "ready like the astronomer who while viewing the heavens sees a shooting star, when I encountered a very voluminous case mounted against D. Guillén de Lampart, for being an astrologer, seditious, a heretic, etc., etc."¹¹

Riva Palacio devoured the Inquisition documents. It was the Irishman he'd heard about as a child in school—he had found him. Don Guillén's story, the actual historical documents, had so much of the novelesque already in it: "The well plotted and well executed romantic escapes told by the French novelists," noted Riva Palacio.¹² Don Guillén, he felt, was Mexico's *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers* all in one. Riva Palacio set out to tell Don Guillén's story that way, as a romantic adventure, but one written to tell of the perennial battle between the forces of superstition and tradition and the forces of light and knowledge. In Don Guillén we see Edmond Dantès betrayed and imprisoned for long years; we see the swashbuckling D'Artagnan in Don Guillén's brisk readiness, with his skilled swordsmanship.

Under Riva Palacio's pen, William Lamport, the Irishman, became Don Guillén de Lampart—a man of many disguises, masquerading as a wealthy creole by day and a hero who participates in a conspiracy to overthrow colonialism by night. He's adept with the sword, but also writes poems. Riva Palacio made Don Guillén love not just one woman but four, which ultimately becomes his undoing as one of the spurned women denounces him to the Inquisition. Don Guillén's best friend is named Diego—and Zorro's alter ego is, of course, Diego; together the two friends form part of a secret society devoted to knowledge and freedom very much reminiscent of the Freemasons. They're called the Order of the Sun in Riva Palacio's novel. Riva Palacio was himself a Freemason, as were many of Mexico's political and literary liberals.

Riva Palacio created the enduring image of William Lamport, always called Don Guillén in his novel—and always, *Lampart*, with an *a*, instead of *Lamport*, with an *o*. Don Guillén has knowledge and wisdom. He knows languages, thirsts for scientific progress, and longs for freedom from Spain's yoke. Bits and pieces of this Don Guillén are present in the historical William Lamport. But the Don Guillén of Riva Palacio's creation looks more like Riva Palacio than the actual seventeenth-century Irishman. Riva Palacio was an army general and a man of letters, a Freemason, a man who criticized the Mexican political establishment. The Don Guillén of his making could've passed as a late nineteenth-century liberal, but one set in Mexico's colonial past. By nature, Don Guillén exists in the novel as a forerunner, a precursor, because Riva Palacio's Don Guillén was something of an anachronism. For all of William Lamport's radicalism, he belonged to his own time and wouldn't have had the same sensibilities as Riva Palacio. But Riva Palacio depicted him that way, nonetheless.

The image stuck. At the turn of the twentieth century, as Mexicans considered the one hundredth anniversary of independence, they looked to Riva Palacio's portrait of Don Guillén for inspiration.¹³ Don Guillén became a hero—the first to proclaim independence from Spain, but a man before his time, and therefore a template of a man willing to die for the values twentieth-century Mexicans held dear. This Don Guillén, very much the man of Riva Palacio's imagination, would be added as a gatekeeper to the pantheon of national heroes at the centenary celebration of 1910 and, thereafter, added to the mausoleum under the Angel of Independence monument. His bodily remains were absent, of course, though his independent spirit was captured in marbled defiance.¹⁴

Vicente Riva Palacio is the *somehow* between William Lamport, the heretic burned in 1659, and Don Guillén de Lampart, statue and symbol of the longing for the daybreak of Mexican independence that pervaded even the darkest hours of the colonial night. But is Don Guillén—the Don Guillén created by Riva Palacio—also the inspiration for Zorro?

I watched Mexico City traffic clutter and snarl around the monument. Many of the apparent similarities between Lamport and Zorro are generic. Don Guillén is a swordsman, he leads a double life, he has a certain success with women. But these elements are basic tropes of many adventure novels.

My doubts increased about the connection between Lamport and Zorro. What about the time and place discrepancy between Don Guillén—seventeenth-century Mexico City—and Zorro of Spanish California around the year 1800? There's no evidence McCulley even read Riva Palacio. There's no evidence McCulley, born in Illinois, ever visited Mexico or that he knew Spanish, except for the few words he sprinkled throughout his novels. And here's the kicker: the novel by Riva Palacio has never been translated into English and was not widely available in the United States at the time McCulley was writing his first Zorro stories. For McCulley to use the Irishman as inspiration for Zorro, he probably needed to actually know about the real Lamport. It's not at all likely that he did.

The theory put forward by Italian historian Fabio Troncarelli is that McCulley must have read about Lamport because both Riva Palacio and McCulley were Freemasons.¹⁵ This, according to Troncarelli, is the *somehow* between Don Guillén of the independence statue and Zorro. McCulley, I found out, was indeed a member of a Colorado Springs Lodge, but he joined the Freemasons in 1925—after he'd already written *The Curse of Capistrano*.¹⁶

As I sat on the monument steps, Troncarelli's theory would have me play the role of Robert Langdon in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*—searching for hidden masonic symbols within McCulley's Zorro stories. I realized I forgot to look for any symbols on the statue of Don Guillén. Troncarelli argues that Zorro's trademark Z is actually a masonic symbol of enlightenment. This, as Troncarelli's argument goes, is the link between Don Guillén's thirst for

scientific knowledge and Zorro's crusade to put right the wrongs of Old California. Zorro isn't just leaving a calling card, he's heralding a new order through his mark. It's an interesting theory, I admit. I really want to believe it. It would make a good movie.

But what if there's an easier explanation for the similarities between Lamport—especially Riva Palacio's Lamport—and McCulley's Zorro than the Freemason theory?

Occam's razor—the simplest answer is often correct. It occurred to me Riva Palacio actually does describe some of his influences in crafting Lamport: French and English adventure novels. In other words, part of the reason why Lamport and Zorro appear so similar is because both Riva Palacio, who romanticized Lamport using adventure novel tropes, and McCulley, who also read nineteenth-century adventure novels, were both reading from the same script.

In the 1800s, British and French novelists were writing romantic tales with swashbuckling heroes—tales of cape and sword. We could list, among these tales, Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), *Rob Roy* (1817), and *Ivanhoe* (1819). In France, we find Alexandre Dumas and his *The Three Musketeers* (1844) and the sequels. Also, Dumas's own *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) provides an important prototype for a hero who has to masquerade as someone he's not in order to exact revenge on his enemies. None of these characters have superhuman powers. But they do have extraordinary skills, and they often have to carry out their schemes for justice in secret, and there's always an element of derring-do about them.

A recent book by Tom Reiss, *The Black Count*, describes the real-life adventures of Thomas-Alexandre Davy de La Pailleterie, the father of the famous novelist Alexandre Dumas. Thomas-Alexandre was born in France's Caribbean slave colonies and was the child of a white planter father and a black mother. Remarkably, Thomas-Alexandre emigrated to France and rose in the French revolutionary army. He was hailed for his remarkable sword skills, his intimidating physique, and his "superhuman" ability to lift a horse off its feet with just his powerful legs. Reiss argues, in the book, that Thomas-Alexandre inspired his son's most famous novels and provided the template for *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Napoleon, apparently, envied Thomas-Alexandre and left him to rot in a dungeon in Italy after the Egyptian

campaign—a plot that sounds a lot like the Monte Cristo novel written by Alexandre Dumas. Reiss notes:

In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Dumas would give his betrayed protagonist not only the fate of his father's final years but also a fictional taste of a dark sort of triumph. In the novel's hero you can see the premise of every modern thriller from Batman comics to *The Bourne Identity*. No other adventure novel of the nineteenth century carries its resonance. After escaping the dungeon and securing the treasure of Monte Cristo, Dantes builds a luxurious subterranean hideout in the caves of the island. He becomes master of all styles of combat, though he mainly uses his mind to defeat his enemies, bending the law and other institutions to his superhuman will. Knowing that the world is violent and corrupt, the Count becomes master of violence and corruption—all with the goal of helping the weakest and most victimized people of all. The Count is the first fictional hero to announce himself as a “superman,” anticipating Nietzsche—not to mention the birth of comics—by many years.¹⁷

Riva Palacio and McCulley both drew from Dumas, in other words. It's not that Riva Palacio influenced McCulley. They seem so similar because they both took elements from Dumas.

And perhaps there's good reason to look for elements of Zorro, especially Zorro's diverse origins, in Dumas's *Count of Monte Cristo*. Any discussion of Zorro, or America's first superhero, should probably start with this novel, based on the real-life adventures and tragedies of the novelist's father. And note: the first character to describe himself as a “superman” was created by a writer of mixed heritage, one who had to constantly battle racist reviews because of his Afro-Caribbean background. Even nineteenth-century adventure novels set in Europe, and written by European writers, owe an unacknowledged debt to diversity. It's true that Lampart became a Mexican icon of independence, which brings Lampart closer to Zorro. But, a character like Joaquín Murrieta, whose life and legend actually took place in California, where Zorro also was set, seems like a simpler explanation than does trying to explain why or how McCulley transferred the story of Lampart to California. It just doesn't really make sense.